

THE CHILDREN OF *EST*:
A STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCE AND PERCEIVED EFFECTS
OF A LARGE GROUP AWARENESS TRAINING
(THE FORUM)

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Large group awareness trainings (LGATs) are a form of personal growth groups which began in the 1970s with the development of Erhard Seminars Training (*est*). These personal growth groups are historically considered to be a further development of the encounter group movement. The Forum, currently the largest of the LGATs, was the program used for this study.

Present day large group awareness trainings have received limited attention in the psychological literature, although *est* was researched by psychologists and psychiatrists in the 1970s. LGATs have been controversial in both the psychological literature and in popular journalism. They have often been compared to psychotherapy in their effects, yet neither the process nor the outcome of The Forum have been studied extensively.

The primary goal of this study was to gain new understanding of the process and outcome of 'large group awareness training' programs, as reported by participants and observed by the primary investigator. For the purpose of achieving this goal, two basic questions were presented for research:

1. What are the conditions provided for the experience of The Forum, and what is the process that results from those conditions?
2. What is the effect (outcome) of the experience, as perceived by the individual participant?

This study analyzed what happens in a training, and documented the outcome that participants attribute to the experience. A qualitative design and methodology were used to collect and analyze the data. Eisner's (1991) *connoisseurship and criticism design*, developed for educational research, was adapted for use in this psychology study. The researcher completed multiple observations of the training, and conducted in-depth interviews with 20 research subjects.

The Forum was found to have a definite structure, curriculum, and pedagogical approach. The primary concepts of The Forum, called "distinctions," were identified. The data indicate that qualitatively significant results were produced in participants' cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains of functioning. Most participants attributed significant life effects to their experience. No psychological risk was found to be present by the subjects' participation. Overall, the study produced information which may provide psychologists with a better understanding of the unique LGAT phenomenon.